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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002830

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ AND THE GLOBAL CHESSBOARD

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.4(b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) With his eye towards increasing his international stature and gaining a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), President Chavez is literally traveling to all ends of the earth. As a part of this strategy, and in addition to his visits and signing of multiple bilateral agreements, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) has recently established diplomatic relations with no less than ten countries, almost exclusively in Africa, sent Presidential envoys to certain countries with whom the BRV does not share official relations, and announced intentions to establish diplomatic relations in the next year with a handful more countries. END SUMMARY

AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS?

¶2. (U) President Chavez' ambitious travel schedule over the last twelve months mirrors his equally ambitious rhetoric about expanding the BRV's diplomatic presence throughout the world. In 2006 alone, Chavez has visited over 25 countries, including Cuba, Syria, Libya, Iran, China, Russia, and the Vatican. Then-Vice Minister for Asia, Middle East, and Oceania, Alcides Rondon said from Vietnam in June 2006 that the BRV plans to increase the number of Asian countries with diplomatic missions as part of its promotion of "multipolarity." Rondon highlighted the recently established mission in Hanoi and pointed to the opening of Venezuelan embassies in New Zealand, Singapore, and Thailand in the near future. Rondon pointed to Singapore and Thailand as an example of the BRV's emphasis on increasing its diplomatic presence in Southeast Asia. Regarding New Zealand, he said the opening of an Embassy there is part of the "Strategic

Plan of Attention" that the BRV maintains with the countries of Oceania.

13. (U) In Africa, Chavez's hobnobbing has augmented the BRV's previously limited diplomatic presence on the continent. In September 2005, Vice Minister for Africa, Reinaldo Bolivar unveiled the BRV's "Africa Agenda," a document detailing BRV plans to strengthen bilateral relations in the region (reftel). At that time, Bolivar announced plans to open embassies in Benin, Senegal, and Ethiopia, before the end of 2005. (NOTE: Presently, the BRV has met that goal only in Benin. END NOTE) In the last fifteen months, the BRV has established diplomatic relations with eleven African countries: Sudan, Chad, Niger, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Mauritius, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Somalia, and Sao Tome and Principe. Bolivar announced that only nine African countries remain with which Venezuela does not maintain diplomatic relations (Cape Verde, Madagascar, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Djibouti, Malawi, Botswana, Swaziland, and Mauritania). Bolivar indicated that the establishment of relations with Cape Verde is imminent.

14. (C) In many African countries, including some where the BRV does not yet have diplomatic relations, Chavez has employed the strategy of sending "Presidential" or "Special" Envoys on his behalf. Madagascar, Mauritania, Egypt, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe, and Cameroon all received such envoys during the months of August or September, while countries such as Gambia, Mali, Benin, and Angola have received recent visits from Chavez himself. While publicly spun as discussions of increased bilateral ties, in this region, Chavez is a wolf in sheep's clothing - his lobbying for votes for the UNSC cannot be masked. Nigerian and South African counterparts, for example, have told Poloff that they are not blind to Chavez' ambitions as a primary driver for his

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outreach to their countries. His interest in the region has been minimal in the past, and their respective governments recognize that the lavish attention paid to the continent in recent months does not stem from purely altruistic motives.

TRAVELIN' MAN

15. (U) While the propaganda shows that emerge when Chavez returns from a world tour are intended to give the impression that his international forays are universally applauded, there are dissenting voices. Journalist and former Ambassador Julio Cesar Pineda complained following Chavez' early August world tour - including stops in Russia, Belarus, Iran, Vietnam, Qatar, and Africa - that Chavez is not a professional diplomat and that the BRV's relations with other countries are politicized, resulting in grand expenditures and few concrete results. Director of opposition party Project Venezuela Carlos Berrizbeitia lamented that since assuming power in 1999, Chavez has spent nearly forty million dollars and over one full year, 379 days to be exact, outside of Venezuela. Berrizbeitia calculated that Chavez has spent 41 days out of Venezuela and spent five million dollars on foreign travel in 2006 alone, an average of nearly \$122,000 per day.

COMMENT

16. (C) Chavez sees himself a "player" on the international scene. His globetrotting is aimed at expanding his international stature and paving the way for his intended inheritance of Castro's hold on the anti-imperialist and non-aligned movement. Chavez is currently facing two elections, one international (the UNSC vote) and one domestic (the December presidential election). His travels and

diplomatic maneuvering are intended to play to both constituencies. When abroad, he presses the flesh and makes promises in hopes of obtaining votes for the UNSC. And each trip abroad sets the stage for a media-happy return of "the prodigal son" during which he can trumpet his accomplishments as a world leader and appeal to the masses in a most Castroesque style. His international travels and lavish promises abroad, however, engender domestic criticism from those viewing the unaddressed and growing domestic problems of crime, corruption and lack of housing.

WHITAKER